

“Baby” Those Teeth

*The Importance of
Age-1
Dental Visits*



A baby's first year is marked with many milestones: that first smile, word, step, and tooth. Parents wait anxiously for all of these first-time events—and then boast about them to family and friends on Facebook. But there's one other important “first” in a baby's life that parents need to anticipate: the first dental visit. The Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS), the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD), the American Dental Association (ADA), and the Massachusetts Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (MAPD) all recommend scheduling a baby's first visit to the dentist within six months of the eruption of the first tooth, and no later than your child's first birthday.

A baby's first teeth usually begin to come in between the ages of six months and one year. This first set of teeth, called “primary” or “baby” teeth, are important and should be cared for properly. Not only do primary teeth help young children to speak and chew, but they also act as space holders in the jaw for the permanent teeth that are developing below the gums and that start to come in when the child is 6 or 7 years old.

Parents may wonder why they need to schedule early dental visits for their children. What sort of dental problems could a baby have? An “age-one visit” to the dentist is analogous to a “well-baby visit” to the pediatrician. These early dental visits allow the dentist to check for tooth decay and other things that may adversely affect the teeth and gums, including habits like thumb sucking, which can cause the teeth to misalign.

And, yes, babies can develop tooth decay. Over-exposure to sweetened liquids, through a baby bottle, is a risk factor for early childhood caries, known commonly as “baby bottle tooth decay.” This condition develops when sugary liquids are given and are left clinging to an infant's teeth for long periods. Many beverages commonly given to babies—including baby formula, milk, and fruit juice—contain sugar. Bacteria in the mouth feed off of this sugar and produce acids that attack the teeth, leading to decay. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, early childhood caries is the single most common chronic childhood disease. Nationally, 51 million school hours are lost by children

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each year due to dental-related problems. Therefore, having ongoing dental care is extremely important for young mouths. Visiting the dentist early enables the implementation of positive oral health practices that reduce a child's risk of preventable dental disease, such as tooth decay.

What to Expect

During the appointment, the dentist will examine the baby's mouth, teeth, and gums. He or she will evaluate any habits—such as thumb sucking or drinking sugary liquids at bedtime—that could adversely affect the infant's dental health and tooth development, and recommend a future schedule of dental visits for the child.

At this time, the dentist will also show parents how to properly clean the baby's teeth and gums. According to the AAPD, parents should clean the baby's gums with water and a soft infant toothbrush or cloth as early as the first few weeks the baby is home. As soon as the baby teeth begin to come in, parents should start brushing twice daily with a soft toothbrush and a small "smear" of fluoridated toothpaste. These dental visits are also an ideal time to educate parents about positive oral health habits and establish a "dental home" for the child. (A "dental home" is a term used to refer to comprehensive, continuous oral care that is delivered in a setting by a licensed dentist to infants, children, young adults, and those with special needs.)

Parents can establish a positive relationship between their child and his or her dentist by starting dental visits early—and continuing checkups and cleanings every six months. Having a dental home helps establish a positive relationship and trust among the child, the parents, and the dental team. By providing children with a dental home, parents can help them grow into a lifetime of good oral health.

Baby teeth may be tiny, but their need for oral care is not.

Big Tips for Caring for Little Mouths

- Clean the baby's gums with water and a soft infant toothbrush or cloth
- Brush erupted teeth twice a day using a soft toothbrush and a small "smear" of fluoridated toothpaste
- Limit the amount of sugary liquids, such as juice, in the baby bottle
- Schedule the baby's first dental appointment when the first tooth erupts or by age one, whichever comes first
- Follow up with twice-a-year dental visits as your child grows

